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ABSTRACT

Photography has always been examined within a representational paradigm that does not accurately reflect its true nature. A new paradigm for thinking about photography based upon the work of language theorists and semioticians, and particularly upon the communications triangle of discourse theorist James L. Kinneavy, provides a vocabulary and perspective that reflect the structure of photographs and enhance rather than obscure our understanding of them. (JL)

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Towards the Conceptualization of The Photographic Image

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Abstract

Since the discovery of the photographic process, most of what has been written about photography has been guided by a representation paradigm. This paper attempts, by bringing to bear some of the current theory in semiotics and discourse, to demonstrate the inadequacy of that paradigm.

The paper also suggests a new paradigm for thinking about the nature of photography. The most important aspect of the suggested paradigm is that it reflects the structure of photographs. Secondly, it provides for the examination of photographs as objects, products of our culture, which are as diverse and varied as their creators. That is to say, it calls for an examination of photographs as themselves rather than as manifestations of something else.

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TOWARDS THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE

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A curious fact arises when studying the development of photography theory alongside the development of language theory. Throughout the classic period language was believed to function as a representation of reality. However, beginning in the 17th Century, our conception of language has undergone considerable change and has emerged in the modern period as one of signification. Photography, which is a product of the modern age, however, is still laboring under a paradigm of representation. In this paper, I will attempt, by bringing to bear some of the current theory in semiotics and discourse, to demonstrate the inadequacy of that paradigm and will also suggest a new paradigm.

That such an assumption exists can be demonstrated by an historical approach to the literature surrounding photography. The photographic process was discovered almost simultaneously by two artist in the 1830's, J.L.M. Daguerre, a Frenchman and William Henry Fox Talbot, an Englishman. Both of them were motivated by a desire to produce a technique which could overcome the inadequacies of realist painting.

When the photographs (daguerreotypes) were made available to the public at a joint meeting of the French Academies of Sciences and Fine Arts they were widely

acclaimed as being the perfect representations of nature: "all the minutest indentations and divisions of the ground, or the building, the goods lying on the wharf, even the small stones under the water at the edge of the stream, and the different degrees of transparency given to the water were all shown with the most incredible accuracy." (Newhall, 1978. p17) The Leipzig City Advertiser took these representations so seriously that they thought they should be banned because, "Man is created in the image of God and God's image cannot be captured by any human machine. Only the divine artist, divinely inspired, may be allowed, in a moment of solemnity, at the higher call of his genius to dare to reproduce the divine-human features, but never by means of a mechanical aid." (Benjamin, 1972. p5)

Photography was generally seen to be the final extension and the point of perfection of realist painting. Talbot, himself, published a quarto containing 16 of his photographs which he titled, The Pencil of Nature. (Talbot, 1969) In the United States, Oliver Wendell Holmes was calling it the "mirror with a memory." No one questioned the ability of photographs to represent.

The only lasting debate about the nature of photography is whether or not it should be admitted to the list of

endeavors which are considered to be the fine arts. Interestingly enough, the debate revolves around the degree to which photography represents, one side arguing that photography transcends its representative nature and becomes Art, the other, that it can never escape the limitations of representation. While this issue was first raised in the 1840's, it has continued over the years and is still being addressed, most notably by Susan Sontag. (1977)

The point to be made here, is that the basic assumption that photography functions as a representational medium remains essentially unchallenged. Without belaboring the point, we can see that the assumption of representation remains current by examining the work of Max Black, (Gombrich, Hochberg, Black, 1972) professor of philosophy and humane letters at Cornell University. In 1977, Black attempted to resolve the question as to "how pictures represent." He concluded that none of the existing theories was sufficient enough to explain how photographs represent (he focuses his study on photographs) and that "clarity about the basic notion of artistic representation cannot be expected to be reached by a process of logical analysis alone, ... but will call for a less tidy and more exacting inquiry into the production and appreciation of art objects within ‚ways of life.' "(Gombrich, 172)

We can now see that a representation paradigm has guided our thinking about photography from its inception to the present time and even though it addresses, in some respects, the actualization of a photographic image it suffers from several conceptual weaknesses in that it 1) ignores the role of the photographer, 2) ignores the role of technology , 3) calls natural that which is artificial, and 4) offers no schema for interpretation. As a result the ideological implications of photographic imagery have remained virtually unexplored.

Upon reflection one might expect that such weaknesses would result from a paradigm which arises out of an investigation into how photography works. If we are to make any progress in understanding the relationship between photographs and ideology we must first break with the representation paradigm and attempt to establish a theory of photography which grows out of an investigation of how we construct meaning from photographs.

This task is essentially analogous to the one left to those interested in language by Hegel, Nietzche, and Heiddeger. As a result of their philosophical investigations, language was demoted to the level of an object to be studied. Their work has removed the final

vestiges of representation from the contemporary concept of language, demystified it altogether.

As a result of the demystification of language it became necessary to study language as itself rather than as a manifestation of something else such as reality or thought. In response to this need, Ferdinand de Saussure in Course in General Linguistics, (1974) posited that language is a series of signs and that a science which studies the life of signs within society is possible: semiology, from the Greek semion (sign). It would show what constitutes a sign and what laws govern those signs. Semiology, therefore, could be used to study any system of signs, no matter what their substance or limits and linguistics would form only one part of the science.

In his landmark extension of Saussure's work, Roland Barthes found that as soon as we begin to study a system of signs in which the sociological significance is anything other than superficial we encounter language. "Thus working at the outset on non-linguistic substances, semiology is required, sooner or later, to find language (in the ordinary sense of the term) in its path, not only as a model, but also as a component, relay, or signified. (Barthes, 1968. p10) Consequently, in Elements of Semiology, Barthes moves from a

discussion of linguistic concepts to their possible application outside linguistics. The text is organized around four pairs of concepts: Langue (language) and Parole (speech); Signifier and Signified; and Syntagm and System from Saussure's Course in General Linguistics and Denotation and Connotation from Hjelmslev's Language: an introduction. (1970)

LANGUE AND PAROLE

Because of the phenomenological confusion of language which is based in a complex of distinct events: physical, social, psychological, neural, physiological, etc., Saussure saw that a properly constituted science of linguistics must disengage its own object: la langue. This langue is a grammatical system which has the potential for existence in every person. It is not complete, however, in any one person, but is an institutional object which exists in its entirety only in a community of speakers. Parole, on the other hand, is the individual act of selection and actualization of the langue. These individual utterances (parole) are taken by linguists as evidence of the underlying and communally understood langue.

SIGNIFIER AND SIGNIFIED

The signifier and the signified are the components of the sign, and the sign is the simultaneous presence of the two. "The notion of the sign is of fundamental importance to linguists and is also notoriously difficult to define. However, it may be initially described as an entity which can 1) become sensible, and 2) for a given group of users marks an absence in itself.(Eco,1979. p42) The part of the sign which can become sensible is the signifier (word, sound, image, etc.) and the part which is absent is the signified.

But, as Jacques Derrida pointed out, this conceptualization of the sign is misleading in that it presents an erroneous image of language as a set of one-to-one correspondences. Whereas in the written text, especially the literary text, there is room for a constant play of interpretations, a play of differences between elements in which the meaning is constantly deferred. Derrida calls this action of differing and deferring, differance. Consequently, the idea of a "true signified" must give way. (Derrida, 1976)

SYNTAGM AND SYSTEM

Syntagm and system (some authors use paradigm for system) are the two axes of language. Syntagm is the plane which results from the linear nature of language, the one which eliminates the possibility of pronouncing two elements at the same time. Any linguistic unit enters a syntagmatic relationship with all the other units which are chained to it in an utterance or text. It is in a paradigmatic relationship with any unit that might replace it in its position in the chain. These relations (paradigmatic) are outside of discourse and are associatied in the memory, resulting in a variety of groupings. For instance, in "a can of peaches," can enters into paradigmatic relations with bowl, peck, bushel, basket, etc. and into syntagmatic relations with a, of, & peaches. On the other hand, in "He fell on his can," can enters into paradigmatic relations with an entirely different grouping.

CONNOTATION AND DENOTATION

Any system of signification (the act which binds the

signifier & signified) exist on two planes, the plane of expression (E) and the plane of content (C) and the signification coincides with the relation (R) of the two planes. Expression is the plane of the signifier and content is the plane of the signified.

Let us say that a system (ERC) becomes an element of a second system. For example, a discussion about images. The first system then becomes the plane of expression of the second system or

2. E R C

1. ERC

The first system is the plane of denotation and the second system is the plane of conrotation.

Discovery of these elements has made possible a general semiotic theory which has the capacity to explain all signs in terms of underlying systems of elements mutually correlated by one or more codes. Generally, a sign is anything which can be taken as substituting for something else and that something else does not have to exist. Thus "semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie." (7)

Distinguishing a sign from a signal is neccessarily then

the antecedent to semiotic analysis. When a code assigns the elements of a conveying system to a conveyed system, the conveying system becomes the expression of the conveyed system and the conveyed system becomes the content of the conveying system. It is here that the sign arises as expression and is correlated to content.

A signal can be a stimulus that does not mean anything but elicits a response. For instance, when the float in the gas tank of an automobile drops to a certain position it trips a switch which sends a signal to the dashboard. When the signal reaches the dashboard, it elicits a response a little red light appears. The red light, however since it can be seen as the antecedent of a consequence must be treated as a sign. A sign is always an element of an expression plane (the red light) conventionally correlated to one or several elements of a content plane (the float is low in the tank.) Thus "signs are the provisional result of coding rules which establish transitory correlations of elements, each of these elements being entitled to enter--under given coded circumstances--into another correlation and thus form new signs." (Eco, 1979. p49)

A single code can also produce many messages, one after the other. For instance, returning to the example, the red

light could also be read as, "I am running out of gas," and "I need to start looking for a gas station," and "I can make another 25 miles." On the other hand, many messages can be conveyed by a single sign-vehicle. Given the application of a different code, the red light could be read as "Oh no, not that old running out of gas routine again."

More importantly, "a single sign-vehicle conveys many intertwined contents and therefore what is commonly called a ‚message' is in fact a text whose content is multi-levelled discourse." (Eco, 1979. p57) Indeed, Metz argues that in every instance of communication we are dealing not with a message but a text which is built upon the coexistence of many codes. (Metz, 1974)

What this means for photography is that it is inappropriate to look at a photograph and ask "what is it?" We must instead ask "what is being said," and secondarily we can inquire into how it is being said. Unfortunately, this presents another problem. How does one approach a visual text whose content is a multi-level discourse?

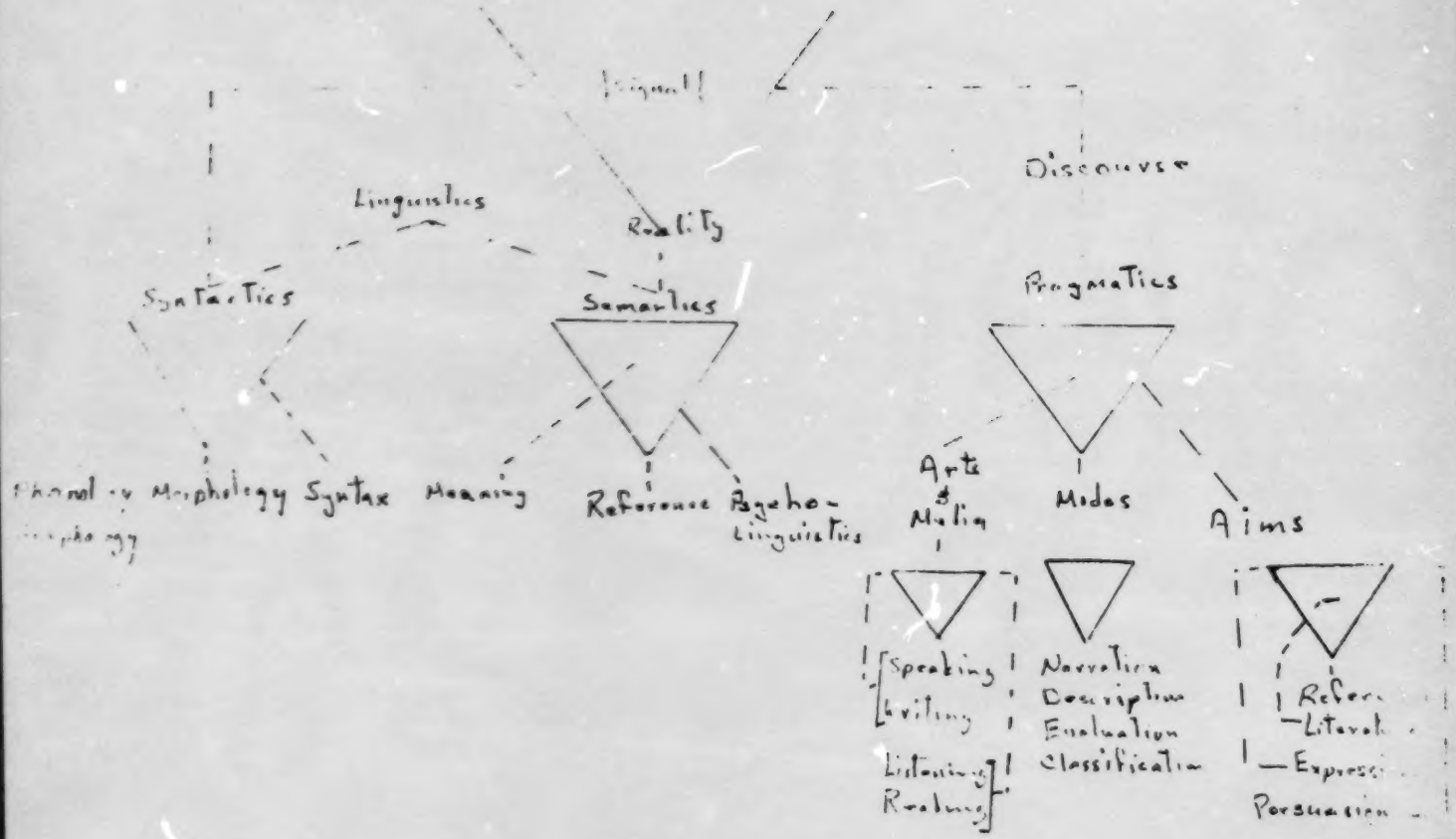
For some insights into this problem, I shall once again return to an investigation of language. In James L. Kinneavy's Theory of Discourse," he points out that discourse

is the study of the situational uses of the potentials of language and that it is constituted by text.(Kinneavy, 1971) It is characterized by individuals acting in a special time and place, is a process, not a system, and has an absolute integrity. It is determined by the existence of a complete text, incomplete texts can not be considered as texts since they prevent closure.

Kinneavy erected the framework for his theory from an historical investigation into the theory and practice of language as well as a survey of current findings. He also used a comprehensive synthesis of the historical and theoretical components of the discipline of English to reinforce his work.

The communications triangle which Kinneavy believes reflects the nature of the language process better than any imported metaphysics provides the foundation for his multi-leveled model. By taking a general view of the triangle, that is, interpreting its factors at the first level as components (signal), the interpretations given to the components (reference to reality), and the use given the Interpreted components by the users (encoders and decoders) he can then use more specific factors where appropriate.

KINNEAVY'S MODEL



APPLICATIONS AT LEVEL A.

Level A abstracts the four basic components of the language. On the left side, descending from and concerned with the signal is the field of linguistics which is made up of syntactics and semantics. Syntactics, fundamentally, is equivalent to grammar and as such doesn't concern itself with meanings of words as referents to reality or the situational uses to which words are put. Semantics, on the other hand, combines elements of the signal and reality in its study of words as referrers to reality. Pragmatics, on the right side of the model, is the study of the use of meaningful or interpreted signals by encoders and decoders.

Together, semantics and syntactics constutute the language as a potential tool and can be seen in relation to Sassure's langue. The study of the potentials of the language which can be drawn upon to speak or write, i.e., rules of syntax, sounds, referential qualities of words, and morphological units are subsumed under the more general field of study called linguistics. Linguistics differs from discourse in that it can be approached outside of a situational context. Discourse, on the right side of the

model, is characterized by individuals acting in a particular context and can be seen in relation to Sassure's parole.

APPLICATIONS AT LEVEL B.

At level B, Kinneavy establishes the main subdivisions of the three basic areas of study in the field of language.

Syntactics includes: 1) the study of the sounds of the language and their written equivalents, phonology and graphology. 2) the study of meaningful units of grammar, morphology, 3) the study of the structure of language, syntax.

Within the field of semantics there exist three branches: 1) theory of meaning, which is concerned with relations between linguistic entities 2) theory of reference, which is concerned with relations between linguistic entities and the world, and 3) psycholinguistics, which is concerned with relations between messages and the individuals who

select and interpret them.

Pragmatics can be separated into three subdivisions for study: 1) the types of signals used, or arts and media, 2) classification of kinds of reality referred to, or modes of discourse, and 3) the reasons for engaging in discourse, or aims.

APPLICATIONS AT LEVEL C

At level C, Kinneavy forgoes any further discussion of syntactics since he is interested exclusively in discourse analysis. Here he determines the basic signals of discourse, the basic kinds of references made by discourse, and the basic uses of discourse.

The signals of discourse can also be seen as the arts and media of discourse, speaking and writing being associated with the encoder and listening and reading being associated with the decoder as the arts. Kinneavy asks for a liberal interpretation of these terms in order to include texts such as those generated through the use of braille and semaphore.

He distinguishes the media of discourse broadly, as the situations which facilitate the transmission of arts of discourse.

The modes of discourse are a classification of the kinds of realities referred to by texts. They are not an application of the communications triangle, but instead are grounded in philosophical concepts of the nature of reality. For the study of language the modes are important because "when the modes are scientific in aim, narration becomes history, description becomes analysis or description, evaluation becomes criticism, and classification becomes theory." (Kinneavy, 1971. p37)

While the aims of discourse, like the modes of discourse, can rarely be found in a purified state, the communications triangle provides a structure for determining the dominant aim. They reflect the purposes people have for constructing and using a language. The aims are differentiated by the elements which dominate the text under consideration.

Texts which are used as a vehicle of expression of some aspect of the personality of the encoder are called expressive. On the other hand, if the text is used to get

the decoder to do or believe something, it is known as persuasion or rhetoric.

However, not all texts focus on either the decoder or encoder. n Those which use the language as a vehicle to convey information about the world are known as referential. Finally, those works which are meant to call attention to the language itself, to its structures, worthy of contemplation in their own right, are called literature. If this is the aim, the author may be hidden behind the text, the reality may be fictive and there may be no attempt at persuasion.

The model to be presented here is a tentative, first step in the application of some of the principles of discourse theory. That it will require modification is certain. That it is a needed step is not only supported by the implications of the process of signification but by the state of confusion and dissatisfaction given voice in the contemporary literature on photography.

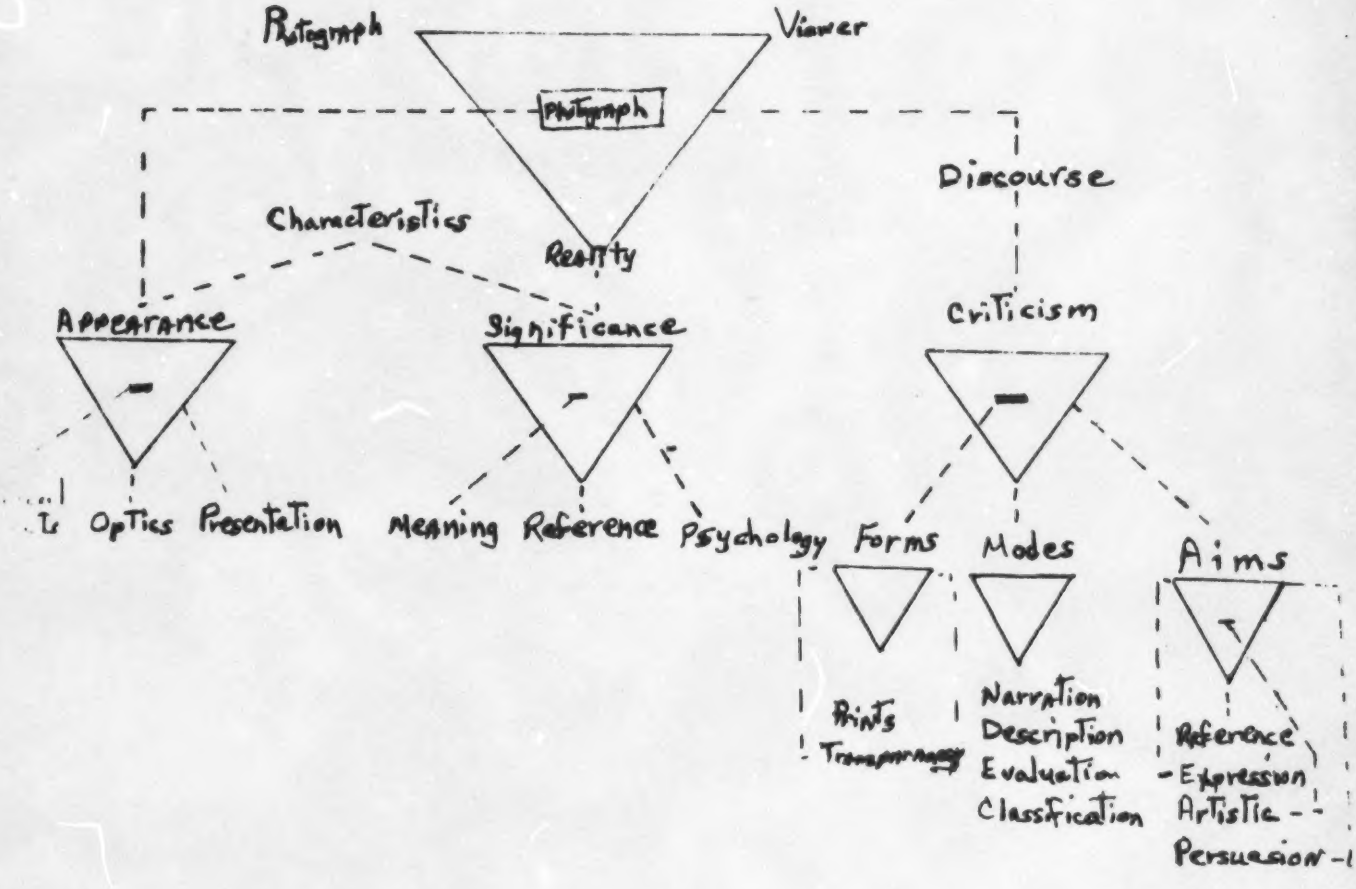
As Henry Holmes Smith pointed out, "the intelligent critical literature on photographs is barely discernable." (Smith, 1957. p138) However, since he made that statement, in 1957, several scholars have turned their attention to photography. Unfortunately the work remains philosophically

atomized and somewhat narrow in scope. Much of this confusion appears to result from the inadequacy of the binary systems used by contemporary scholars and critics as frameworks for their examinations of photography. In each instance, elements of the communications process remain unconsidered. For instance, Szarkowski (1978) wants to consider photographs either as windows on the world or as mirrors which reflect the photographer or something in between, if there is such a place. Jay attempts to use the humanism/naturalism dichotomy, in an effort to incorporate "intent" into the discussion. Burgin (1975) is concerned with whether critiques reflect a fetischistic, romantic aesthetic or a more democratic, culturally based position.

The work of Walter Burgin, Christian Metz, and Allan Sekula gives additional support for the integration of discourse theory into theory of photography. "Simply because a message is, in substance, visual it does not follow that all of its codes are visual. Visual and non-visual codes interpenetrate each other in very extensive and complex ways.(Burgin,51) One might, indeed, extend that argument beyond the idea of interpenetration to one of a common ancestry in the communications triangle. Metz approaches that position: "In truth, the notion of ‚visual' in the totalitarian and monolithic sense that it has taken on in

certain recent discussions, is a fantasy or an ideology, and the image (at least in this sense) is something which does not exist." (Metz, 1974) And finally, Sekula attempted to engage "something we might call a ‚photographic discourse'" in order to extract the ideological positions involved in a documentary vs. fine arts photography dilemma. (Sekula, 1975)

MODEL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC DISCOURSE



APPLICATION AT LEVEL A

Since photography has not been studied as widely as language there is no classificatory terminology appropriate to the model. Consequently, I have employed terms which I hope reflect the work which is done in the area as well as the nature of the medium.

At Level A, are appearances, significance, and criticism. Appearance should be taken as the purely visual aspects of the photographic image, excluding any consideration of meanings. Significance, on the other hand deals, insofar as is possible, exclusively with considerations of how meaning is constructed. Criticism, like pragmatics, is the study of meaningful or interpreted signals by encoders and decoders and is always concerned with a particular photographic text.

APPLICATION AT LEVEL B

At level B, I am attempting to establish the main subdivisions which constitute the three basic elements of the medium. The appearance of a photograph is determined by the technical aspects of the image (density, tonal rance, color balance, etc.), the optical effects of the lens mechanisms, and by the mode of presentation, size and format for instance. The work done in these areas more often than not falls into the realm of the hard sciences.

Within the elements of significance, there are also three major concerns which reflect the communications triangle. Here it seems appropriate to maintain Kinneavy's terminology. We also have available some considerable amount of work in these areas. Semioticians such as Roland Barthes, (1977) Dudley Andrew, (1979) and Umberto Eco (1979) have made consequential investigations into the relations between photographic entities. The relationship between photography and the world has been of particular interest to sociologist, cultural anthropologists, and historiians. For examples we can turn to the work of Goffman, (1976) Ohrn, (1977) or Scherer (1975). The psychological implications of imagery and image makers is of particular interest to a group of French film critics centered around the Cahiers Du Cinema.

Criticism also can be separated into three subdivisions: 1)the form or types of photographic image, 2) the subject or kind of reality referred to, and 3) the aims or reasons for engaging in the photographic discourse.

APPLICATION AT LEVEL C

At level C, I will give no further attention to the left side of the model since any further work there would require extensive knowledge of chemistry and physics and within our area of concern as social scientists, the model offers no challenge to the status quo.

The forms of the signal appear to be a function of the relationship between encoder and decoder. If the encoder wishes to make his/her image available to a large number of people in a short period of time, s/he can opt for using transparencies. If it is to be made available to a smaller number of people or if a longer period of time is available, a print is more likely. In any case, without introducing

mechanical reproduction equipment such as wire-photo transmission, photo-copying, television, or printing into the schema the photographer is generally limited to prints or transparencies.

The modes of photography are classifications of the kinds of reality referred to by photography. They are limited by the conceptual capacity of the photographer and by the technical aspects of the medium. While the single image may be limited to the descriptive mode, texts made up of more than one photograph often function in the other modes. Duane Michaels, for example, is known for his work in the narrative mode which he exploits by printing several frames on a single sheet.

The evaluative mode is even more commonly used by photographers and while contemporary press photography attempts to avoid it, it is central to the work of other photojournalists such as W. Eugene Smith. In fact, the photographs produced by the Farm Security Administration during the thirties are securely grounded in evaluation. So is much of the latter work of two of the FSA's most famous photographers, Dorthea Lange and Ansel Adams. (Ohrn, 1977)

The contemporary beginning of criticism might well lie

in the work of Robert Frank in the Americans. (1978) Whether or not that can be demonstrated historically, criticism has since become a major area of endeavor for contemporary photographers.

Classification is employed less often by photographers who get public exposure but is an important mode for those working in the sciences. However, it can be seen to be an element of the work of Bill Owens in Suburbia Our Kind Of People: American Groups And Rituals. (1975)

Once again, we find Kinneavy's structure appropriate for understanding the aims of photographic discourse. The one change in terminology necessary is to change literary to artistic. While few photographic texts can be said to have a single, isolated aim it is usually possible to discerne the dominant aim. And, as in discourse, they can be determined by characteristics of the texts.

CONCLUSIONS

Changing from a representational paradigm to a communications paradigm has important implications for the study of photographs. While photography is demoted from the lofty position of representation to discourse we can expect that there will be some compensation for that demotion. When the Classical order of language drew to a close and lost its transparency, it began to fold in upon itself and acquire its own particular density. To know language was no longer to come as close as possible to knowledge itself. However, we have been compensated for that loss in three ways, 1) language is a necessary medium for scientific knowledge, 2) critical value is bestowed upon its study, and 3) literature appeared. (Foucault, 1973) It is reasonable to expect similar compensations for photography's fall from representation.

Additionally, the new paradigm has important practical implications. The most important being that it supplies a vocabulary which reflects the structure of photographs. The current vocabulary usually falls short of describing photographs and obscures rather than enhances our

understanding of them. What, for instance, does it mean when we say that a particular image is journalistic?

Journalism is a profession and its nature is nearly as diverse as the people engaged in it. So are its products. Consequently, to say that a photograph is journalistic only provides a vague reference to its nature. On the other hand, to say that it is a referential photograph, immediately offers a framework for understanding and evaluation.

The strength and limits of the new model lie in the fact that it is structural in nature. Consequently, it reflects the make up of the photographic image and provides for an examination of photographs as objects, a task which functional approaches can not accomplish.

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